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ABSTRACT

In a sample of more than 400 fifth grade students, the reading comprehension levels of children living with both parents and children living with only one parent were compared. Data were collected on the demographic variables of race, student sex, family organization (two parents/one parent), parent educational level, family occupational prestige, and family income. Two-way analyses of variance were used to ascertain variability attributable either to independent variables or to interaction effects. A trend was evident in which the two-parent, high-prestige cell produced higher reading comprehension. For the below median income level group, one-parent family organization was associated with lower reading comprehension. The difference in reading comprehension between two-parent and one-parent family organization was greater for black students than for white students. Although students from two-parent families tended to have higher reading comprehension scores than students from one-parent families, there was an apparent lack of discrepancy between the family organization patterns in the higher ranges of the socioeconomic variables. Family organization seemed to have a greater impact on the students in lower ranges of the socioeconomic scales. (RL)

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SINGLE PARENTING AND READING COMPREHENSION ACHIEVEMENT

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Single parenting appears to be an increasing phenomenon in our society. Various reports indicate that perhaps 50 percent of all marriages conclude in divorce. While the stigma of children being labeled as being from a "broken home" appears to be lessening as teachers are confronted with ever increasing numbers of children whose parents have decided to dissolve their marriage, and as teachers themselves are forced to deal with their own divorces, much remains to be learned regarding the effects of divorce upon learning. Given the acknowledged impact of teacher expectation upon student achievement, it is appropriate to collect data regarding the reading comprehension levels of children who live with both parents and of those who reside with only one parent.

The authors' basic objective was to systematically collect and examine data regarding student reading comprehension achievement and various family demographic variables. The questions for which a response is intended are as follows:

Are there differences in the achievement levels of students who live with one or both parents?

Are there differences in achievement between boys and girls within the dichotomy of family organization?

Do racial characteristics play a role in any possible effects of family organization upon student achievement?

Do the various components of family socioeconomic status effect the responses to any/all of the previous questions?

Project Description

The locale for this effort was a midwestern city with a population of approximately 100,000 and a public school student population of 15,000-20,000. Being the site of a major university, the population must be considered

atypical, at least in terms of community education achievements. The student population is made up of 17.5 percent ethnic minority group members, 13.9 percent of which are black. The next largest minority sub-group is Asian-American, which comprises two percent of the student population.

The population for this study includes all fifth-grade students in the school district. The size of this population is approximately 1,400 students. Within this population the students in twelve of the schools were identified as appropriate for a sample of manageable size. Six of these schools are those with the highest percentage of minority students, as well as the highest percentage of low-income families based upon the district's E.S.E.A. Title I eligibility report. The remaining six schools in the sample were identified as most closely representing the average elementary school when both minority and low-income percentages were the primary consideration.

Within the twelve identified schools, the decision was made to concentrate the study upon the fifth-grade students. The reason for this decision was that each fifth-grader had been administered a standardized survey achievement instrument.

The California Achievement Test, normed and published by CTB/McGraw-Hill in 1970, was used to collect data regarding student achievement. The CAT-70 was administered to all fifth graders in the fall of the school year. Classroom teachers administered the tests to their students. The reading comprehension subtest was utilized for the data necessary for this study. This subtest then was the dependent variable.

Demographic data were gathered from all fifth graders by asking parents to complete a new school registration form. Added to the standard school

form were additional parent occupational and educational categories. The decision to request these demographic data from parents was made after a review of student files disclosed a serious lack of family information. In addition to the problem of missing data, it was recognized that much of the data in the files originated upon the student's enrollment in school six years earlier.

Independent variables included are: Race, sex, family organization (two parents/one parent), and three measures of family socioeconomic status. These SES measures are: (1) The average educational level of the parents. These data were determined by summing and then averaging mothers' and fathers' years of education. In the case of data for only one parent, the data represented the mean. (2) The highest occupational prestige factor in the home was utilized if two parents were employed (Siegle, 1971). (3) The estimated total family income was the third factor. These data were taken from the Detailed Characteristics, 1970 Census, utilizing occupation information supplied by the parents.

Data Analysis

The size of the sample is over four hundred. Of this group, approximately twenty percent comes from single-parent homes. The minority group size of the total sample approximates the total population figure of seventeen percent.

Examination of the data for variability attributable either to independent variables or interaction effects was carried out through the use of a two-way analysis of variance utilizing a least squares method. The reader should also be advised that mean achievement values are expressed in terms of raw scores obtained on the reading comprehension subtest of the CAT-70.

The following series of tables examine the relationship between the independent and dependent variables utilizing the two-way analysis of variance model. Significant comparisons were noted at the .05 level for committing type 1 error.

Family Organization and Parental Education as Independent Variables

Table 1 examines the data for parental educational level and family organization on the dependent variable of reading comprehension. It will be noted that statistically significant differences were observed on both main effects, but that the interaction effect failed to approach significance. Children from two-parent families scored at a higher level than did those from one-parent families. Similarly, student achievement levels increased with their parents' level of education. The interaction of these two variables, however, had no effect upon achievement.

Family Organization and Parental Occupational Prestige as Independent Variables

Data regarding family organization and parental occupational prestige are presented in Table 2. Again, statistically significant differences were observed on both main effects, but the interaction effect failed to reach significance. Children from two-parent families outscored those from families whose parents live apart. In a like manner, students whose parents' occupational prestige was above the median outscored those whose parents ranked below the median. While the interaction effect lacked statistical significance, the magnitude of the F statistic was large enough to begin to consider the possibility of a trend which indicates that the two-parent/high prestige cell tends to produce higher reading comprehension scores.

TABLE 1

READING COMPREHENSION ACHIEVEMENT CONSIDERED WITH FAMILY ORGANIZATION AND PARENTAL EDUCATION

Family Organization		Parental Education: Up to 12.5 years	12.5 to 16.5 years	Above 16.5 years
One Parent	N	39	27	23
	M	17.1	23.4	27.7
	SD	8.5	9.3	7.7
Two Parents	N	84	141	120
	M	20.8	25.5	29.2
	SD	9.0	7.2	8.1

Least Squares ANOVA

Source	df	MS	F	Prob.
Family Organization	1	439.5	6.7	.01
Parental Education	2	2568.8	39.3	.000
Interaction	2	31.6	.5	.61
Within	428	65.4		

TABLE 2

READING COMPREHENSION ACHIEVEMENT CONSIDERED WITH FAMILY ORGANIZATION AND OCCUPATIONAL PRESTIGE

Family Organization		Occupational Prestige: Below Median	Occupational Prestige: Above Median
One Parent	N	52	37
	M	18.8	26.0
	SD	9.5	8.0
Two Parents	N	171	174
	M	23.7	27.6
	SD	8.6	8.1

Least Squares ANOVA

Source	df	MS	F	Prob.
Family Organization	1	848.1	11.9	.001
Occupational Prestige	1	2223.9	31.1	.000
Interaction	1	198.4	2.8	.10
Within	430	71.5		

Family Organization and Family Income as Independent Variables

The interaction between family organization and income level produced a significant effect on the dependent variable of reading comprehension. Table 3 illustrates these data. The data indicate that the difference between the two-parent and one-parent organization is not as great for the above median income level group as for the below median income level group. For the below median income level group, the one-parent family organization is associated with lower reading comprehension than the two-parent family organization.

Family organization and Race as Independent Variables

Table 4 examines student achievement data in the area of reading comprehension considering family organization and race as the main effects. The main effect of race and the interaction effect produced statistically significant variability while family organization was very near that level. White students recorded higher scores than did black students. The interaction significance leads to the conclusion that the difference on reading comprehension between two-parent and one-parent family organization is greater for the black students than for the white students with the black students from one-parent families having the lowest mean.

Family Organization and Student Sex as Independent Variables

Family organization as a main effect had a significant impact upon reading comprehension when considered with student sex as the other independent variable. Students from two-parent families achieve at a higher rate than do those from one-parent families. The sex of the student was not significant nor was the interaction effect. Table 5 illustrates these data.

TABLE 3

READING COMPREHENSION ACHIEVEMENT CONSIDERED WITH FAMILY ORGANIZATION AND INCOME LEVEL

Family Organization		Income Level: Below Median	Income Level: Above Median
One Parent	N	57	32
	M	19.5	25.7
	SD	9.8	7.8
Two Parents	N	167	178
	M	24.7	26.5
	SD	8.7	8.3

Least Squares ANOVA

Source	df	MS	F	Prob.
Family Organization	1	835.6	11.2	.001
Income Level	1	730.1	9.8	.002
Interaction	1	330.1	4.4	.03
Within	430	74.7		

TABLE 4

READING COMPREHENSION ACHIEVEMENT CONSIDERED WITH FAMILY ORGANIZATION AND RACE

Family Organization		Race	
		Black	White
One Parent	N	37	51
	M	15.0	26.5
	SD	7.8	7.6
Two Parents	N	66	265
	M	19.4	27.0
	SD	8.2	7.9

Least Squares ANOVA

Source	df	MS	F	Prob.
Family Organization	1	236.2	3.8	.05
Race	1	5672.4	90.9	.000
Interaction	1	242.7	3.9	.049
Within	415	62.4		

TABLE 5

READING COMPREHENSION ACHIEVEMENT CONSIDERED WITH FAMILY ORGANIZATION AND STUDENT SEX

		Sex	
Family Organization		Male	Female
One Parent	N	45	44
	M	21.8	21.7
	SD	9.1	10.1
Two Parents	N	191	154
	M	25.8	25.5
	SD	9.0	8.1

Least Squares ANOVA

Source	df	MS	F	Prob.
Family Organization	1	1052.7	13.7	.000
Sex	1	8.3	0.1	.74
Interaction	1	0.4	0.0	.95
Within	430	77.1		

Conclusions

The generalized observation regarding the data must be that students from two-parent families tend to record higher reading comprehension achievement scores than do students from one-parent families. Often these findings are tempered by the apparent lack of discrepancy between the family organization patterns in the higher ranges of the socioeconomic variables. Generally, family organization seems to have a greater impact on the students in lower ranges of the socioeconomic scales. The reasons for this may be obvious. The higher income, prestige, and educational level parent is more apt to have the time, resources, and experience to direct toward student achievement levels. The observation is certainly not striking. Still, students from two-parent families scored higher regardless of the other effects.

While data collected seem to have fairly specific trends, the authors urge caution in generalizing the results. Too little is known regarding the effects of other family organization variables, i.e., siblings. We have no measure of the length of time students have lived in a one-parent model. Nothing is known of other significant adults or of the role of the missing parent. Similarly, it has not been possible to gauge the psychological stage of development through which each student was passing when the physical separation from a parent occurred.

Many factors are likely to impact a student's reading comprehension achievement. The authors have attempted to provide data which would indicate the need for classroom teachers to consider the possible needs of students who reside with one parent.

Significance

As our society goes through a period of seemingly accelerated social evolution in terms of interpersonal relationships, family organization, and demands upon existing institutions, it seems appropriate to consider the possible affects of these modifications upon student reading comprehension achievement within the framework of the well established study of teacher expectation. As the persons generally most intimately involved with children outside of their homes, teachers must constantly be aware of their own personal biases. Being members of various other social, religious, ethnic, etc. subgroups, teachers quite naturally carry with them the perceptual screening apparatus of all other members of our society. These perceptual "blind-spots" may be racial. They may be social class-oriented. Or, they may be directed toward the lifestyles of the parents of children for whom they are charged with the responsibility for the development of basic academic skills.

As key persons in the lives of children, teachers must work to be aware of their personal biases, especially as these biases and expectations impact the reading achievement of their students. The current study seeks to illuminate what seems to be an area which has drawn little attention, and to suggest to professional educators a possible need to modify programs to meet the special needs of specific categories of students.

Further, the authors see in these data support for the position that single parents should strive to obtain improved job skills and as a result increased income and higher occupational prestige. This report may then be seen as support for those who argue for equality of opportunity in training and employment for all persons. Since only one single parent in this study was a father, this support is obviously directed toward the feminist movement.

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